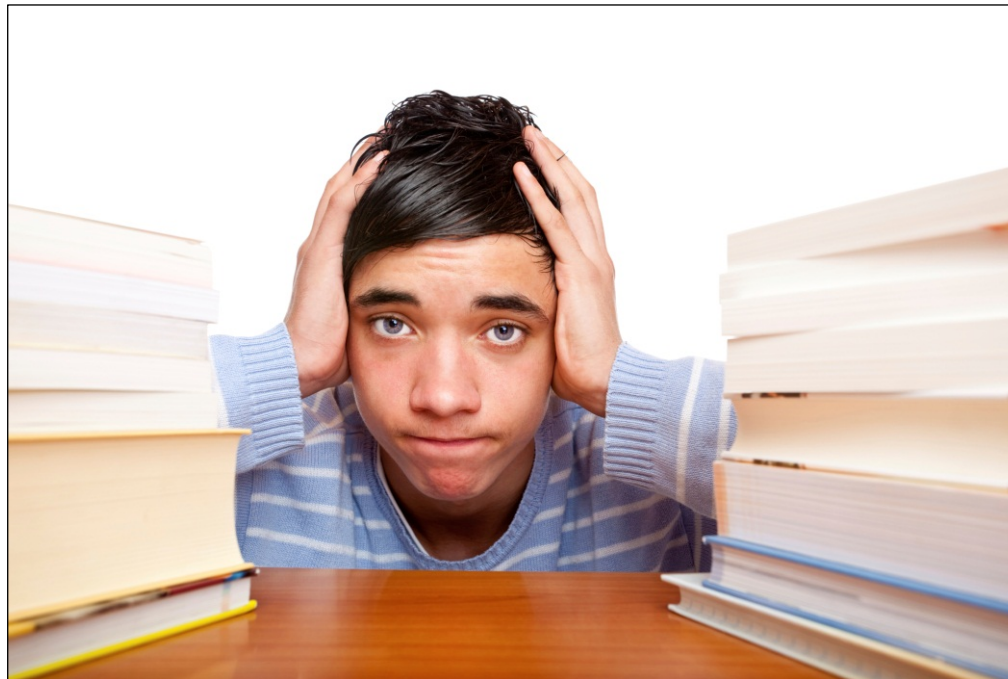# Centre for Education Research and Policy

What should be keeping us up at night? Perspectives on the key threats to the general qualification system

Dr. Michelle Meadows and Dr. Stuart Cadwallader

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Approach

- Face to face interviews

- Open-ended questions

- Qualitative approach

- Two key questions:

    I. **'What are the major threats to delivery of the examination system?'**

    II. **'What are the major threats to public confidence in exams?'**

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Interviewees

- Key stakeholders
    - Senior staff from the English awarding bodies
    - Senior staff from the regulating body
    - Senior examiners
    - Academics
    - Key stakeholders from other education institutions

- Eighteen individual interviews

- One focus group (five participants)

Timeline of events

April	May	June	July	August	September
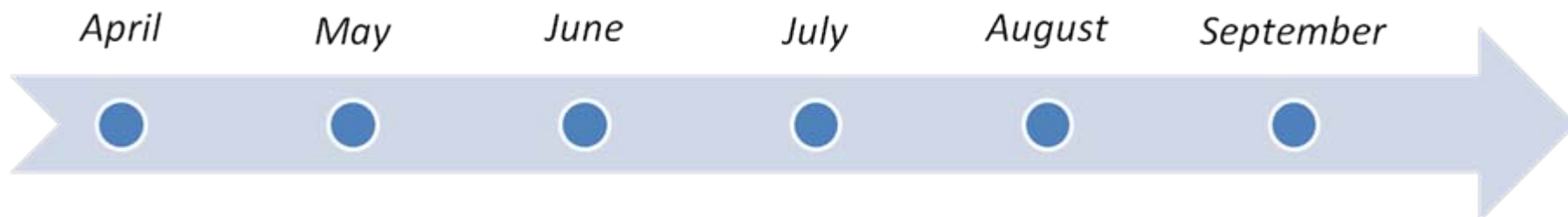
First risk interviews	Summer exams		Marking & Awarding	Final risk interviews	Data analysis

A-level reform plans announced		Plans to reform GCSEs leaked	Select Committee report	Issues with GCSE English	GCSE reform plans announced
Ofqual report on Exam board seminars		A-level reform consultation			GCSE consultation opens

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Shaping our research

- We would really appreciate your thoughts and feedback to guide our research.

- You have been given a booklet which we would like you to complete during this presentation.

- The first of these questions is broadly the same as the one we asked in our interviews.

Please briefly outline what you believe to be the three biggest threats to the safe delivery of the examination system.

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Preliminary analysis

1st Scrutiny period:

Two researchers independently read each transcript. Themes are identified and coded onto transcripts.

Narratives emerge:

Themes emerging from 1st scrutiny are shared and discussed. Key common narratives are identified.

2nd Scrutiny period:

Two researchers re-analyse each transcript, this time identifying instances and counter-instances of each narrative.

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Narratives

Do you agree with these narratives?
How strong are these threats?

1. **Political imperative:**
   "Politicians introduce change too quickly and without sufficient evidence or consideration of the impacts"

2. **High stakes:**
   "The high stakes nature of general qualifications for students, in terms of their future prospects, and for schools and teachers, due to use of results as an accountability measure, has a negative impact on the quality of both learning and assessment."

3. **Public expectation:**
   "The public have unrealistic expectations about the level of accuracy that can realistically be achieved by the awarding bodies."

4. **Clarity of purpose:**
   "There is a lack of clarity about the purposes of both GCSE and A-level qualifications, and this causes problems for those who wish to use the results."

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Narratives

Do you agree with these narratives?

How strong are these threats?

5. **Technology:**
"Increased use of technology has led to logistic benefits to qualification delivery, but difficulties in managing public relations."

6. **Passivity:**
"Exam boards have been too passive in their relationships with stakeholders, politicians and the media; this is now changing."

7. **Press scrutiny:**
"The reporting of education and assessment in the media is largely negative with a focus on 'bad news stories'. This damages public and political confidence."

8. **Expertise:**
"It is difficult to maintain a sufficient number of expert examiners and technical staff and this threatens the quality of assessment and increases the risk of operational failures."

Narrative 1 – The political imperative

Politicians introduce change too quickly and without sufficient evidence or consideration of the impacts

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Narrative 1 – The political imperative

"…it's all a question (of) the political imperative to try to get things done quickly… if you push ahead too strongly on that then you can see that safe delivery might be quite difficult and, rather than ending up with a whole load of better (qualifications), we might end up with some that aren't half as good because we've rushed them."

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Narrative 1 – The political imperative

"There's a risk, yes, that it might not be a very good policy but that's usually negotiated quite well between the people who put it in place and the regulator so the awarding bodies usually find a way of turning what might at first glance appear to be a duff policy into something that's at least half workable so, in my experience, I think of these things it's not so much whether or not there's a really bad idea gets put into practice because that usually hits the buffers at some point and gets transformed into something that will at least work. It might not work very well. It might not be the ideal solution but at least it's doable. But it is this question of actually putting it in place… there's kind of a caveat there which is, in order for that buffer to work effectively between policymakers and policy implementers, there's got to be a period during which ideas are tested and that's a big problem with rapid policy implementation in that it doesn't allow sufficient time"

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Narrative 1 – The political imperative

"It's the tinkering. We don't get to a place of stability, consider, review, make changes in an informed and managed way which is how I would expect a qualifications system to operate."

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Narrative 1 – The political imperative

"If you could remove that political interference, I think that the changes would be very slow and I think they would be natural evolution that would lead to improvements"

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Narrative 2 – High stakes

The high stakes nature of general qualifications for students, in terms of their future prospects, and for schools and teachers, due to the use of results as an accountability measure, has a negative impact on the quality of both learning and assessment.

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Narrative 2 – High stakes

"There is an imperative to get decent results to get jobs when you know you've got 50 people applying for the same job. Further education, higher education, there's obviously pressure on university places and with what might be perceived as grade inflation over the last few years, it's no good getting 'Cs' and 'Bs' for many things, you've got to get your 'A*s' and your 'As' at the top end now to get into the best universities and universities themselves in some subjects have a pecking order so, for instance, if you want to do medicine, there's half a dozen universities you'd want to go to and they can be extremely selective."

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Narrative 2 – High stakes

"I suspect most head teachers see GCSEs in terms of 'how can I get the best results so that my school performs as well as it possibly can?' rather than 'how can I ensure each of my students is going to be taking the right courses and getting the best results for them?' and the two are often similar but not entirely"

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Narrative 2 – High stakes

"…everyone wants to feel confident that his or her children's teachers are good enough to a certain level, you'd actually want them to be outstanding, and you need measures in place to judge that. You want to know that any kind of external testing that goes on is good enough and does what it says on the tin and you need some kind of accountability in place for that. What I meant was that it seems to me that more and more the system begins with accountability rather than beginning with the curriculum"

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Narrative 3 – Public expectation

The public have unrealistic expectations about the level of accuracy that can realistically be achieved by the awarding bodies.

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Narrative 3 – Public expectation

"Now transparency is a good thing but transparency in many ways increases expectations and also demonstrates the flaws that you've got and we are in an industry where any flaw is unacceptable. We are in an industry where only 100% correct and accurate is acceptable."

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Narrative 3 – Public expectation

"You know, if you think of exam grades as a currency, the undermining of a currency is always catastrophic so if people start losing confidence in the currency, whatever that means, then it's very hard to win back."

Narrative 3 – Public expectation

"…it needs to be demystified. I'm not saying that we should expect the general public to have a full understanding of what goes on but I wonder whether there is sufficient understanding, even at the levels of schools and, you know, teachers. Do they really understand what goes on and how, what we mean by standards in qualifications?"

Narrative 3 – Public expectation

"So the way institutions deal with individual or indeed sectorial or systemic risk matters and if they can establish a pattern of being relied on to do the right thing, you know, that will help public confidence in my view. Now, you know, there's a bit of a way to go for us there I think."

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Narrative 4 – Clarity of purpose

There is a lack of clarity about the purposes of both GCSE and A-level qualifications, and this causes problems for those who wish to use the results.

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Narrative 4 – Clarity of purpose

"So what is it that the exams are supposed to tell you? Are they actually supposed to tell you if students have met particular criteria or are they just supposed to tell you the rank ordering so that the student was in the top 10%? So, for me, it won't surprise you to know that I think this is a societal question. What do we want these exams to do?"

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Narrative 4 – Clarity of purpose

"You should have qualifications which are all about benefitting the learner and preparing them for life, either whether that's onto higher education or employment whatever that might be. And have a completely different solution for how you measure the success of schools, you know, you say you want one solution that does both."

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Narrative 4 – Clarity of purpose

"You could make things a lot better from a technical perspective by developing a whole set of different qualification assessment systems each with their own purpose and each engineered to fulfil that purpose more effectively than the systems are engineered at the moment. At the moment… our assessment systems are for multiple purposes and fulfil certain purposes much better than they fulfil other purposes."

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Narrative 5 - Technology

Increased use of technology has led to logistic benefits to qualification delivery, but difficulties in managing public relations.

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Narrative 5 - Technology

"I mentioned electronic marking being a way of reducing errors both actually errors in marking itself and also the addition (of marks) but obviously introducing that new technology and new way of working is introducing change and therefore introducing risk until you've matured the process to that new way of working."

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Narrative 5 - Technology

"The examinations themselves should not be affected by what's on the internet but coursework elements could well be. Plagiarism, people putting things on there, it's already happening to a significant extent"

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Narrative 5 - Technology

"Before, a centre might ring up with an exam, now the students will have a mass discussion on Facebook discussing it. There could well be no error at all but a kid can't do the question and says 'oh there was a mistake on this paper'… and it can escalate and escalate and so we could be running around trying to deal with things like that, at the same time we're actually trying to deliver the series."

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Narrative 6 - Passivity

Exam boards have been too passive in their relationships with stakeholders, politicians and the media; this is now changing.

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Narrative 6 - Passivity

"I think we cop too much flak as awarding bodies because we don't actually stand up and speak with authority and say yes there will always be problems with assessment because of this, this and this… we need a strong voice to negotiate collectively as well as individually with the regulator."

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Narrative 6 - Passivity

"It is about the awarding bodies providing hard evidence and using their research programmes to actually scan the horizon to think what might be coming so that they're well positioned to advise Government and do that in a trusted way."

Narrative 6 - Passivity

"So we actually are stronger than we think we are but I think the other issue is we don't necessarily in all situations send the right people in to engage and we don't as an industry engage with enough of a single voice."

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Narrative 7 – Press scrutiny

The reporting of education and assessment in the media is largely negative with a focus on 'bad news stories'. This damages public and political confidence.

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Narrative 7 – Press scrutiny

"The media's interest in the system is selling newspapers and for making good radio broadcasts and good television broadcasts and increasingly good social networking and that thrives on bad news, ok? And obviously the public's confidence in the system is undermined by the fact that the media concentrates on bad news"

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Narrative 7 – Press scrutiny

"The Press I think is the biggest risk... In the first respect that, if something goes wrong, they will pick up on it and they will magnify it in order to tell a story but also it predisposes key stakeholders to the massively risk adverse within the system so things that could actually make the system less risky are less likely to be implemented because of fear about what the Press would say if they got hold of that thing that you were planning to do and spun it in a particular way or if you tried it and it went wrong."

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Narrative 7 – Press scrutiny

"To put it another way… are we planning to do the press gallery or are we planning to do good assessment. I think we should do the latter but I think sometimes the latter makes you vulnerable to the former."

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Narrative 7 – Press scrutiny

"Bad news does sell newspapers and the media is very effective at doing it so we have to clean up our act I think."

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Narrative 8 – Expertise

It is difficult to maintain a sufficient number of expert examiners and technical staff and this threatens the quality of assessment and increases the risk of operational failures.

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Narrative 8 – Expertise

"it's a kind of systemic risk if you like because people don't come into our business from a degree or training course that would qualify them to do the kind of stuff that we do. So inherently what we do is kind of an art form if you like that's passed down from person to person …"

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Narrative 8 – Expertise

"It all depends on quite a few people actually at key times."

Narrative 8 – Expertise

"And there must be some threat to that cohort of trained expert examiners, if you believe they are trained and expert, to them continuing to be available en masse I think, you know, must be a significant risk."

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Connected narratives
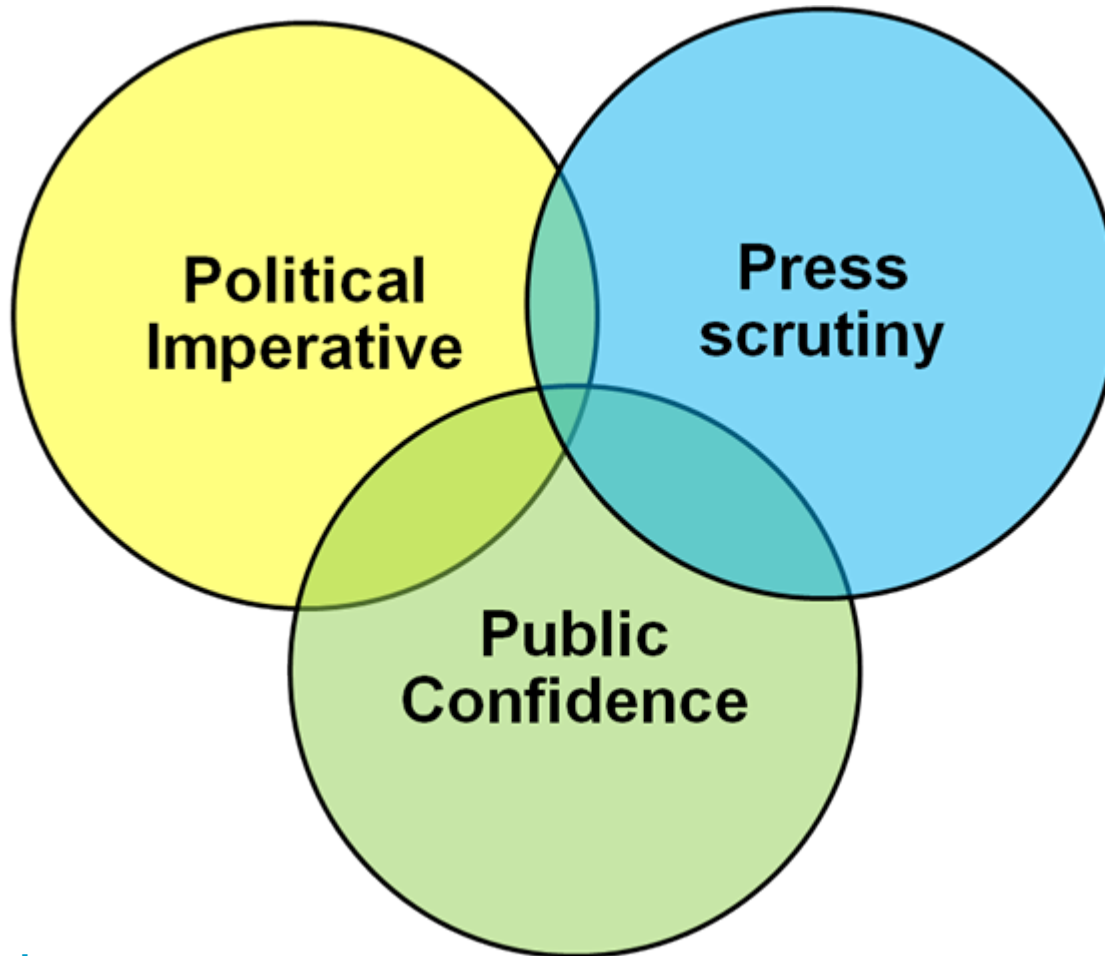
Next steps for our research

- Further interrogation of data and development of narratives

- Explore differences between stakeholder groups

- Complete a literature review and compare risk in the exam system to that in other public services

- A quantitative study which draws on a broader sample

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Risk and opportunity

- How can we tackle these threats?

- Can we negotiate these threats in such a way that makes our exam system better?

- What opportunities do we have in the current landscape and how can we realise these?

Thank you for listening!

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